

OR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Wednesday, May 4, 2005

Contact: Drew Nannis (202) 225-5065

STARK, DEMOCRATS INTRODUCE LEGISLATIVE PACKAGE TO HELP MORE THAN 20 MILLION OF THE NATION'S UNINSURED

WASHINGTON, D.C. – As part of “Cover the Uninsured Week,” House Democrats, led by Congressmen John D. Dingell (MI-15), Pete Stark (CA-13), Sherrod Brown (OH-13) and John Barrow (GA-12), today announced the introduction of three legislative measures which could cut the number of uninsured Americans by half.

The Medicare Early Access Act, being introduced by Rep. Stark and Brown, makes health insurance available to early retirees; the Family Care Act, being introduced by Rep. Dingell, targets children and families; and the Small Business Health Insurance Promotion Act, being introduced by Rep. Barrow, targets small businesses and self-employed individuals.

The Census Bureau reported about 45 million Americans lacked health insurance in 2002 and that number is rising steadily. Americans are losing their jobs, and along with it, health insurance for them and their families. Employers are also struggling to maintain health insurance as a benefit for their employees.

If enacted, these three bills could provide coverage for more than 20 million uninsured Americans:

The Medicare Early Access Act allows the nearly 4 million uninsured people over 54 but not yet eligible for Medicare to purchase Medicare coverage. Enrollees would pay a fair premium and would receive all the benefits Medicare beneficiaries enjoy. To make these premiums affordable, enrollees would receive an advanceable, refundable tax credit to cover 75 percent of the cost.

The bill's lead author, Rep. Pete Stark, Ranking Democrat on the Ways and Means Health

Subcommittee stated, "Early retirees are finding it more and more difficult to find adequate coverage as employers reduce or eliminate benefits. The Medicare Early Access Act provides a real, affordable health coverage option to the fastest growing segment of the uninsured. By building on Medicare, a program that works so well for so many, people aged 55 through 64 will have access to the coverage they need."

The FamilyCare Act builds upon two programs, Medicaid and the State Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP), that have had great success in insuring children and people with disabilities. The bill provides incentives for states to extend coverage to working parents and makes it easier for states to find and enroll eligible children and their parents in these programs. This bill would provide health care coverage for approximately 7.5 million low-income parents while further expanding coverage for children.

"While states have made great strides in providing insurance to children, coverage of their parents lags far behind," said Dingell. "In some states up to two-thirds of low-income parents have no health insurance coverage and research shows that covering families together gets more children enrolled in programs as well."

The Small Business Health Insurance Promotion Act creates state and national multi-insurer pools to provide comprehensive and affordable health insurance choices to small employers and the self-employed. Additionally, this bill offers help securing affordable health insurance through a 50 percent tax credit aimed towards defraying the cost of providing health insurance for their employees.

"The majority of uninsured in our country work for a living, but either they can't afford the high cost of health care coverage, or the premium prices are too expensive for their employers to pay for," Barrow said. "It's time Congress did more to help our small businesses offer health insurance as an affordable benefit for their workers. You shouldn't have to be a Fortune 500 Company just to afford basic health care benefits for your employees."